

Interview with Esther Peterson

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

ESTHER PETERSON

Interviewed by: Hope Meyers

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Q: This is Hope Meyers. I am about to begin an interview with Esther Peterson at her home in Washington, D.C. The date is 4 December 1989.

When you went into the Foreign Service in 1948 with Oliver Peterson, you were fairly well established. You were about 45, I think? (Mrs. Peterson was 42.)

PETERSON: Yes.

Q: You had a number of children.

PETERSON: Four.

Q: And this was a big step perhaps?

Q: Compared to other people who had been in the Foreign Service before you, and for some time after you, you were pretty well established, both of you. You had been in Washington during the war, and before that in New York, both working and studying. Would you talk about that?

PETERSON: Yes, I had been. I grew up in Utah, and came east. That's where I met Oliver, at Columbia. And, of course, he's the one who gave me all my wild ideas. He was

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wonderful. I had lived a very protected life up to that point, and he opened up the world to me which was so wonderful. That's when he was studying, and I was studying.

Then I went to Boston after I got my Master's degree, and he was at Harvard, and I got interested in labor questions and that put me into ... I worked with the women in the sweat shops. I had a terrific experience with my very first baptism in knowing the exploitation of women which was an extremely important part of my life at that time.

And then from there I got into the Bryn Mawr Summer School for women workers in industry.

Q: Would you talk a little bit about that? I think the woman who organized and ran it was someone you admired greatly.

PETERSON: I admired her very greatly. It was Hilda Smith. She had been Dean of Women ... Dean — not Dean of Women, because Bryn Mawr is a Women's school. She'd been Dean at Bryn Mawr. [The school] was the idea of M. Carey Thomas who was [then] President, but Jane Smith as we called her (Hilda was her name) was the one who really carried it out. There were two things: one, she believed very much in the democratic process; that we had to teach people. She thought that women had to begin to take leadership roles. She felt that women's colleges were sitting empty all summer — and why aren't these facilities being used for the disadvantaged?

That was my international baptism because she insisted that it be a small world. And we had students from all over the world. We had Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, England. Bryn Mawr alumnae in these various countries and Foreign Service wives, too, I'm sure, many times raised scholarships to send these women to this school.

Q: And these were actual working women?

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PETERSON: They were all working women. They were textile workers, garment workers, rubber workers, domestic workers. I'm just thinking of all of them, but they were workers. You see, the only basis of coming to that school was that you had to have earned your own living for three years. Nothing about education. Nothing about anything like that.

Q: How long did it last — the sessions?

PETERSON: It lasted for eight weeks, two months, and then it lasted for years until it was ... during the radical days, you know, of Martin Dies, and all of us were [supposed to be] communists [but we] never even looked, never even turned our head to the left, I'm quite sure. But at that time then it moved over to the Hudson shore and then we worked quite closely with Mrs. Roosevelt which was the time that I got acquainted with her, which meant a lot to me.

Q: You knew Mrs. Roosevelt long before ...

PETERSON: I had known her when I was working in New York. I had worked with her a little on a number of things, helped in campaigns and things like that. You know I'm not deep in her, but I know her. It was the last years that I worked with her more on the Status of Women Commission after we came back from Foreign Service.

Q: Yes, I want to talk about that later if we have a few minutes. But then, at some point, you and Oliver Peterson, by that time married, went to Washington.

PETERSON: Yes, then we came to Washington.

Q: Was that precipitated by the war, that move?

PETERSON: He became part of it; it was all the whole New Deal area when he worked in the FER(Federal Emergency Relief Administration). I'll have to look up all the alphabet soup of that period. He worked also with Hilda Smith and we got acquainted with her, part

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of that through the workers' education experiments that he worked on a lot during that period. So I guess it was ... the war brought a lot of that on, yes.

Q: But, in any case, during the war years you were both in Washington. In this house perhaps?

PETERSON: We were both in Washington. No, no, we came here after we came back from [Europe]. We were in Washington, in Silver Spring at Forest Glen.

Q: But during that period of the wartime years, you were working with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union here in Washington.

PETERSON: Yes, I was their representative in Washington.

Q: And you then, at the end of the war, presumably continued your work. But suddenly there came an opportunity to go to Sweden. Would you tell me how that came about?

PETERSON: I figured it happened ... in fact, they (Mrs. Peterson's recollection suggests that both State and Labor Department officials were involved, with input, perhaps, from labor union officials.) had talked to Oliver. Labor governments were beginning to be formed in the European countries, especially in England. They had no one in the Foreign Service that had any contact, or even understood the labor movement. So they were looking for people that had that experience and this is what my husband had. I remember, first they offered us India, and I was afraid because of taking four little children. I read the post report, and I thought, "Ohhh, I'm not sure I want to take my children there." Oliver and I discussed it (he was working for the Committee for the Marshall Plan) and we decided against that. And then later on the offer came for Sweden, which we thought was wonderful, and which we accepted.

And I had to give up my work which — oh, you do — I'd always found interesting things to do wherever he was anyway.

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Q: But that offer came at a very early stage in that development of having labor attach#s.

PETERSON: He was one of the first ones. The one that went to England was first, (According to Mr. Harold Davey of the U.S. Department of Labor, the first labor attach# was Dan Horowitz appointed to Santiago, Chile in 1943. Samuel D. Berger began his service in London in 1942 working on lend-lease; subsequently he became labor attach# there.) and then France was one. I think Oliver was the third or fourth.

Q: I thought it was rather interesting that [one of] the very first ones was [appointed] to the Soviet Union [in 1943], and he was turned down by the Russian government on the grounds that he was a potential CIA agent (This was Walter Golanson, who later (1945-46) served as labor attach# in both Norway and Denmark.). So there was not a labor attach# for a number of years at all in the Soviet Union.

PETERSON: That's very interesting.

Q:... and certainly during that period.

PETERSON: I didn't know that.

Q: But, indeed, Oliver Peterson was one of the very early ones, and the second one in Sweden.

PETERSON: Wasn't he the first one in Sweden?

Q: No, there was another man.

PETERSON: A labor attach#?

Q: Yes, who was there for two years but there was a break for some unexplained reason.

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PETERSON: I wonder who that was. (According to the records of the Department of Labor, an R. Forsyth served as labor attach# in Stockholm between 1944 and 1946 — The State Department's Biographic Register lists Richard A. Forsyth as a senior economic analyst at the Stockholm embassy during the same period — No mention is made of his having functioned as labor attach#, thus corroborating Esther Peterson's, and others', statement that Oliver Peterson was the first person to hold the post.) I have no memory of that. That's very interesting.

Q: Apart from your orientation with Oliver Peterson toward the activities of the labor movement in Sweden particularly, you were part of the Embassy.

PETERSON: Yes.

Q: When you went to Sweden, because of this broken contact, if there was one, between your predecessor — if he existed — and yourselves, a gap of some time had elapsed, how did you pick up the thread, or did you?

PETERSON: I wasn't aware there was any thread. I don't recall picking up any threads. I recall our feeling our own way, and deciding what we would do, and how we would do it, and doing it.

Q: I wondered whether, for example, through your earlier work, whether at the Bryn Mawr school or elsewhere, you had already developed yourself some contacts in Sweden? Or whether you went there really without any?

PETERSON: The only contacts that we had before were the students that had come to the Bryn Mawr summer school. I shall never forget a wonderful sign, writing them that we were coming, and one of the girls, a laundry worker, standing on the bridge knowing we were driving up from Gothenburg, to be sure that she saw this dollargrin (Slang for big, expensive American car), the station wagon, to greet us.

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Q: Isn't that wonderful.

PETERSON: And they were wonderful to us, these girls. There were six students who had been at Bryn Mawr and they became a wonderful nucleus to help us get started; get help, get a house, and things like that.

Q: Yes, well, of course, I wanted to ask you, where did you live? How did you find a place to live?

PETERSON: We lived first in ... the Embassy put us up in Saltsjobaden, this fancy hotel where we had to dress for dinner. So can you imagine taking these little [children, one a] two-year-old, and dressing for dinner, and of course, he had to go to the bathroom — always in the middle and ...

Q:... and the Swedes are very formal.

PETERSON: And we were not used to this. I'll never forget calling Greta Hudin, saying that we can't manage this. We had a house that we were to rent eventually; there was no furniture, nothing had come, and she and those girls got together and got us some army cots, went to EPA (Swedish equivalent of Woolworth's) and bought us enough plates, and knives and forks, and got us some blankets, and we got a few things that we needed, and we camped in that house until our furniture came. I couldn't stand Saltsjobaden, I couldn't stand dressing up for dinner every night, and having these children ... ridiculous. Very ridiculous.

Q: Then, after this unfortunate beginning, you began to make your way, yourself as well as Oliver Peterson.

PETERSON: Those contacts for both Oliver and me, we were mutual friends, of course. That also, I think, helped us a great deal.

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Q: Did you, with Oliver Peterson, have contacts within the Embassy in terms of the entertaining?

PETERSON: No, not before.

Q: No, but while you were there.

PETERSON: Oh, yes, of course.

Q: You did participate then in a good many of the Embassy activities?

PETERSON: Oh, yes, a lot of them. That was one of my objections because we had to participate in the afternoon, late, when I needed to be home with my children. I found it much harder to be an Embassy wife than to be an employed woman in the United States.

Q: You had two rather illustrious ambassadors while you were there; Freeman Matthews and Walton Butterworth. Did you have the feeling that they, and their staff, and their wives, were appreciative of your approach?

PETERSON: Yes. I liked them both very, very much, and with "Doc" Matthews we had a marvelous time with him. I shall give you one example. It's an amusing one, but it's very interesting. When we went — you see we didn't know anything about this business. We had our cards printed, and we had to call on the ambassador and have the corners turned down. This was completely new coming from the labor movement.

We knew nothing about ... and we had lived modest lives, not part of social ... you know. So we went to call, took the children, dressed them all up and went to the door, and in came a great big doberman pincher, their dog, Ben. And the first thing that dog did was jump up on my daughter, Karen. And Karen took her hand and swatted that dog, and said, "You don't do that." And I thought, "Oh, here's where we lose our job." But do you know that dog went over and licked Karen, and she said, "If you will be a good dog I ... " and the

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ambassador was so impressed that Karen became the person that went over and trained that dog, and they gave us the pick of the litter.

Q: How marvelous! How exciting.

PETERSON: But the point is, I was scared to death ... he liked us immediately. And the very fact that our kids were free enough to say, and do, and we became very good friends. It was through them that I got to be a very good friend of Lady Redding of the [British] WVS (Women's Volunteer Service) and came back and forth a great deal with them. We liked them very, very much. And the Butterworths, too. Our children were very good friends with the two Butterworth children. They used to spend a lot of time with us. They had parties together. We liked them both very, very much.

Q: Then apart the formalities of Embassy life which obviously were not to your taste and habit, your life began in Sweden to take on a particular form. Did you work, yourself?

PETERSON: Did I work? You mean gainfully employed?

Q: Yes, exactly.

PETERSON: No, no. Well, I did a study the second year I was there for the Women's Bureau (in the United States' Department of Labor). I got very impressed when I had a party, or I'd be invited, and they'd say you have to come so-and-so, because we don't want to pay overtime. And I thought, "Overtime for domestic workers?" The social standards impinged on ... I learned about that and thought, "I've got to do something about that." So I talked with people. I'd been adviser to the Women's Bureau, and they asked me if I would do a study on domestic employment, which I did. That's the only thing that I had for any gainful employment.

Q: I've seen that study, and it's an imposing number of pages. Not to speak of all of the detailed work.

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PETERSON: Have you seen the original? Or the final?

Q: Yes, I've seen the original one (completed in 1952), as well as the final one (both studies are among Esther Peterson's papers in the Schlesinger Library). And what, of course, crossed my mind as I was turning the pages, was the amount of time it must have taken you.

PETERSON: I took a lot of time on it. But you see, I liked it. It opened doors for me, and, I think, opened doors for my husband too. We met and had interviews with people, and I had a reason. Doors were opened for us all over. We had no problem at all, with the labor movement. I think they appreciated that we became ...

We had another experience that was something. How can I say this ... it sounds boastful, and I don't mean to be boastful. The point is, we tried to live our American way — but by their standards. And that's why I would be sure — and I got mad at Embassy wives that were doing everything they could to exploit the domestic workers by doing it like they did at home — and I said, “Not on your life.” We want diplomatic immunity for all kinds of things ... and [it was] these women who had never had a servant in their life that were exploiting ... Oh, I just got furious! I'm sorry to say those things bothered me a lot, because we became bad Americans. Now that's not true of the Embassy people ... some of them.

(interruption for a phone call)

Q: You were talking about your distaste for some Embassy wives.

PETERSON: A lot of them, if I may say it, were the lower ranks that had never had any experience with any of these things. Oh, I don't know what it was ... there was a little feeling of ... but it bothered me.

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Q: I can see that it would. Among the things that I know that you did was to work in association with the Swedish Confederation of Labor ... of Trade Unions. In the course of that work, I think you met a Swedish woman who was very active.

PETERSON: Sigrid Ekendahl. She's still my dearest friend. We try to see each other once a year. I was just over there recently.

Q: Let me go back a minute. I was under the impression that actually much of the American labor movement, in its executive positions, was staffed by men. I wondered if the position that she occupied in Sweden was new to you, and possibly even unique in Sweden?

PETERSON: Yes, it was new and unique in her being that high in the hierarchy. Very definitely. You see she was the only woman member of the LO (Swedish Federation of Labor) executive board. We now have Joyce Miller, and some here, but it was years before that. Very true. I found the women there ... well, there was Greta, there was [Helga Johanson, Lilly Ostrand], there were a number of very leading trade union women.

Q: Had you had the impression already at that time that Swedish women were able to take positions and live the kinds of lives that women in this country were not doing?

PETERSON: I think they were beginning to, yes, definitely. I was impressed with the Royal Labor Market Board, the emphasis on women's employment. We had tried to do some of those things here in the Women's Bureau when I had been on the Advisory, but nothing to the extent there. It was part of the warp and woof of the whole Royal Labor Market Board, and there are studies about the problems of women's employment, and what the things were. And the equal pay is one of the things that I [learned about] ... no problem.

Q: During the time that you were in Sweden, I think you packed up and left, and came back to the United States.

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PETERSON: I got a call from Philip Murray, who was the president of the CIO, saying, "Esther, we need you badly." It was when the Taft-Hartley [Act] was up [for repeal] (Following President Truman's election in 1948) and they felt I was the only one who could get into certain senators' offices. I'd worked with them, they liked me [but] I said, "I can't come possibly. I have a two-year-old child." "Well, just see if you can't." So I telephoned and I got the housekeeper who used to ... The Wilbur Cohens bought our house in Forest Glen and they kept my housekeeper ... and I called Julia then, and, of course, she would take care of Lars. She had helped before.

Q: This was your youngest?

PETERSON: That's my baby, my youngest. So I called [Philip Murray] back and said the only way I could do it would be if I could bring him back. And Oliver thought I should do it, and it was important to the labor movement there that I was called back. So I did come back and work on that. And there was another advantage for it because at that time Oliver was negotiating getting a trip for the Swedish officials to come here on a visiting trip. You know how they do that under the USIA. So I was here at that time and therefore could kind of help from this end. And I shan't forget going to La Guardia to meet them when they came, and thank heavens I was there. Because our Immigration had a red flag on Axel Strands, and they didn't want to let him in. The president of the Swedish Federation! I didn't let him see it, I negotiated, I called people in Washington. If I hadn't been there he might have been sent home.

Q: Then it was very fortunate.

PETERSON: We do some of the sloppiest things! I thought, "Thank God I was there, it was worth the whole thing." So anyway they were here and I took them around the Hill. I had them meet with Rayburn, McCormack, I had them meet with everybody. I think they appreciated [that] very much. They were very grateful. They told Oliver and it was very

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sweet how much it meant to them. They accepted me completely as a woman, I had no trouble being a woman. So I did come home.

Q: And you were here about six months.

PETERSON: Oh, no, not that long. If I was here two months, that was it.

Q: I thought it was a bit longer than that. How did your children like being in Sweden?

PETERSON: At first it was very difficult, extremely difficult. Oliver and I had thought, "We're not going to put them in the fancy French school. We're going to put them in the Swedish schools," and all this business that we believed in very much. So we put them in the public school, and they had a terrible time because they couldn't speak, and they would come home crying. Poor little Iver came home, he'd wet his pants because they wouldn't let him out to urinate. It was very, very bad. We had a rough time. Karen came home crying one day. I didn't know what it was ... I finally got hold of the teacher and the man had said, "If I embarrass her, she'll quickly learn Swedish." It was the old, old Swedish way. So we took them out and put them in a private Swedish school, H#glandstorget. There it was much, much better. Then we [had a tutor] every day.

This is why being a wife of a Foreign Service Officer was difficult, because when they came home I had to be there. We put Lars in a day care center. We got a taste of the difference in the new system of education that was coming. They start with the young ones and then they move it up, and they're getting rid of that old authoritarian type, thank goodness. But with Lars, I should tell you ... it was a little neighborhood school, he was two years old, right near. I went over to see them — and yes, they could take him. He needed companionship, you know. The teacher was so wonderful. She spoke English, and she said, "Bring him in tomorrow because I want to tell the kids all about it." So the next day I took Lars in, and here they sat around and she said something to them. I found out afterwards what she said, "Here's this little boy that only speaks ... but he's just like you, the same thing and everything," but there are certain words that will be a little bit like

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English in Swedish. And she gave different ones to them. They stood in a circle and a little girl stood up — I almost wanted to cry when she said, “Kom, Lars,” and went over and took Lars's hand.

Q: How marvelous.

PETERSON: I just get weepy about it because to me that symbolized this kind of thing in Sweden that meant so much to me. And the same thing in the school, and the things that happened. Eric was hit one day in the other school by a teacher and the boys came home to me with him and said, “He didn't do anything wrong.” One of the boys [a neighbor] who spoke English [told me], “Somebody else pushed him ...” I was furious, so I went to the school and the kids said, “You'll go talk to them? Would you do it for me? My mother would never do that.”

You see we have a whole different philosophy of participation. So I learned a lot.

Q: You traveled a good deal, I suppose, in Sweden.

PETERSON: Yes, we did.

Q: And your associations there, apart [from] episodes like this, I take it were extraordinarily happy ones.

PETERSON: Oh, they were very happy.

Q: That must have meant though that, regardless of the ability of the Swedish populace generally as with many Scandinavians to speak other languages — you had to learn Swedish perhaps? How did that ...

PETERSON: It was very hard for me. The children learned very quickly, and Oliver already had had Norwegian so he was able to pick it up quite quickly fortunately. They said he spoke Swedish with a Norwegian accent because he had learned Norwegian when he

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was five years old and had not spoken Norwegian since he was a kid because they all wanted to become Americanized in this country, of course. Isn't that interesting? So he did well, and the children did well. I was the one that had the hardest time and I had a teacher come to teach me, and I was paying this money and one day I said to him, "I'm just not learning a thing. I've got to do something better." And he said, "Oh, Mrs. Peterson, I'll come for nothing. You're helping my English so much." And I realized I was giving him English lessons. So it didn't happen until I met Sigrid, and then she and I began exchanging ... she knew not a word of English, I knew not a word of Swedish, and we met and worked together. I had a hard time but then I got so I could understand quite well and manage, I had what I call kyckling spr#ch (chicken talk). But I never got good at it, because people spoke English. Sigrid learned so well. Language has never been a good thing for me.

Q: But nonetheless I think you must have felt, as so many Foreign Service wives have felt, that language was a virtually indispensable part of coming to know other than the restricted population of an Embassy.

PETERSON: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

Q: As you know, of course, this is still a matter which has not been attentively tended in the State Department, and one which women today are still working toward on a better basis.

PETERSON: I wish it luck because it's terribly important. I think of that when I think that we paid for all of our lessons.

Q: That triggers another question that I had. As an attach# I assume that Oliver Peterson's salary — looking back at the salaries of that time — was not enormous ...

PETERSON: No, in fact we took a big cut because we lost my salary.

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Q: Yes, of course. And I wonder too about the standard of living in Sweden. Always high and expensive, and probably comparatively speaking, even more so at that time.

PETERSON: We were able to manage. We certainly didn't save a thing but we lived comfortably and well. But we certainly couldn't splurge. And when we [traveled] we camped a lot, we lived very simply.

Q: I have had the impression that during the time you were in Sweden for the most part your activities, understandably, were focused on the Swedish scene, but, of course, a great deal was going on of grave concern to the American government.

PETERSON: We had war ...

Q: Not only that but going back to the Berlin airlift ...

PETERSON: The Berlin airlift was not while we were in ... was in '49. I was trying to think because when we got there ... '49 and '50.

Q: Because there was a great deal of evidence at that time of tension between the Soviet Union and not only the United States but the rest of Europe. In fact the period that you were there was the beginning of the Marshall Plan. You said that Oliver Peterson had worked on the preparation for that, the planning of that. This was before you went to Sweden so you were very familiar with that. But that was also, alas, that period that you were in Sweden, the beginning of the McCarthy era which touched, of course, as you know very well, the Foreign Service.

PETERSON: Well, it touched us deeply. I'm sure you know that, don't you?

Q: No, I did not, but I wondered whether in fact it might have?

PETERSON: Well, it did, and I don't know whether I should talk about it or not.

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Q: That is as you choose.

PETERSON: He was on the McCarthy list, my husband, because of my work as much as his. In fact, in the hearing it came out that communists were known to meet in my office. I was doing it for Phil Murray under his instruction (Murray at that time, and later, was engaged in a struggle with communists in the CIO, which ended with the communists being ejected from the CIO.) and, of course, we did go through a hearing and Oliver was cleared completely by it. But we went through hell. We went through hell.

Q: Everyone who was touched directly by that suffered enormously and their friends suffered with them.

PETERSON: It is one of the things that killed Oliver. He could not stand the things. He wouldn't let me talk about it, I couldn't tell the children about it because, "They'll say there's something about Dad ... " And how can you explain all the ... it was absolutely hell.

Q: When did that come to you?

PETERSON: We were then in Brussels. Could you imagine? We had just moved at Christmastime, and then Oliver coming home and had an "Eyes Only" thing to the ambassador that Oliver was to be ... it was the whole McCarthy thing. Everybody was on the list. I think Oliver was the only one on the list there. I think he had a list of probably 200.

Q: Yes. This was the original allegation, at any rate.

PETERSON: It was hell. So they said he had to come home for consultations, which he did, and left me with the children there not knowing what, and then he had to come home and build up his case. Of course, he won but we had to get a lawyer and had to go through all that. Which again was a great drain on us financially.

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Q: Yes, as it was on so many others.

PETERSON: It was a cruel period.

Q: *It was one of the most devastating periods I think and only now beginning to be realized in the context of the effect that it had long term on reporting, which still lingers I'm told.*

PETERSON: Oh, I'm sure it does. One of the things in Oliver's that came up is that we had entertained the Deep River Boys, these blacks that were on a concert tour. And they said that one of them was a communist and in his record was that he entertained communists in his home. It was the Deep River Boys. One of them happened to ... whether he was or wasn't, who knows, we never asked these questions. I try to not think about it because I get very emotional about it because it hurt my husband. It hurt me. It hurt my children.

Q: *Everybody who was ever touched by that can scarcely talk about it, that period.*

PETERSON: I can't talk about it, and he wanted me not to talk about it. But we were part of it.

Q: *You left Sweden in 1952, after four years, and came back to Washington?*

PETERSON: No, then we went to Brussels after Sweden.

Q: *Yes, but there was an interval apparently, you didn't go directly.*

PETERSON: Only home leave.

Q: *Only home leave? Isn't that interesting. I thought there was a longer period than that. Then, in other words, when Oliver Peterson, and of course you together, decided to go to Sweden and take up this post as ...*

(machine turned off for phone call)

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... when you took up that post in Sweden, and took that offer affirmatively as part of your lives, did you think of the acceptance as a long-term one? In other words, did you think this might lead to a long time ...

PETERSON:... to others, and I think if Oliver had not developed cancer that would have happened.

Q: And that came ...

PETERSON: That came at the end of the Brussels [tour], when he came home and had the examination. We were then set to go either to Canada or Australia and I was studying these different posts at that time. And then he couldn't leave, of course.

Q: Another very difficult time. Could I go back for a minute and talk a little bit more about Brussels because that was quite a shift from Sweden on the periphery, you might say, of Europe and then suddenly into the middle of Europe. Had you ever been to either country before?

PETERSON: We had traveled with the children and gone through to see them. Oliver and I on our honeymoon had gone to the Scandinavian countries. We had both wanted to know what brought our people over originally which was fascinating. We had been in Germany and France with the touristy kind of thing that we went through but not for any real visit. We were in Germany just before Hitler took over, so we had that experience just before Hitler came to power.

Q: That was '31, '32?

PETERSON: That's right. I remember that very, very definitely. It was just beginning to come. We saw the so-called spontaneous demonstrations, and we got acquainted with a few people who we lost touch of. They probably were killed. A very difficult time but we had an awful anti-Fascist feeling at that time. One of the songs that they taught me — one

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of these women. "Sleep my little one. Go not red. Be a light tan darling. But the red ones are struck dead. Many times, my darling." I can't forget it, and this woman. But that was long before the Foreign Service days.

Q: Brussels must have been quite a different place from Sweden, for you personally, and possibly also for Oliver Peterson. What ways?

PETERSON: Well, it was different. He was reporting on the ICFTU, for the whole Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which meant he had a much broader assignment than just Brussels. And he covered Luxembourg too which is interesting. But all of the policy things of the entire international labor movement came there and headquartered with him at ICFTU.

Q: That was initiated — the whole ICFTU organization began during ...

PETERSON: It began shortly before then; it was the World Federation of Trade Unions, WFTU, and that's when the communists were part of it. When I was in [Sweden] they called me and I went over and represented the United States at the Congress in London when they were beginning to get ready to kick out the communists. But by the time we were in Brussels the communists had left, and it was the ICFTU, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. (Mrs. Peterson added the following for clarification: At about that time, the WFTU was breaking up because of Soviet efforts to use it as an anti-Marshall Plan weapon. Both the AFL and the CIO were active in creating the western-oriented ICFTU, and Philip Murray asked me to go to London as part of the CIO delegation there. So I was in at the founding of the organization which played so crucial a part in both the re-birth of free trade unionism and the reconstruction of Europe under the Marshall Plan.)

Q: You again, there, I think, were one of the very few women, if not the only woman.

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PETERSON: I was the only woman, yes. I have a picture of me in Life Magazine sitting with all of these big men. It was interesting yet I didn't think about it as woman exactly, but it was quite special.

Q: At the same time there was, if I'm not mistaken, a direct link perhaps between a school that you initiated in France (At La Brevi#re, near Paris.), and the earlier Bryn Mawr summer school.

PETERSON: Yes.

Q: Was this something that you ...

PETERSON: It's nice that you know about that. How did you know about that? Lovely. I didn't think anybody knew about that.

Q: I found it absolutely fascinating. Please talk a little bit more about it.

PETERSON: Well you see, I was volunteering like mad every place, of course, which I've done all my life. And there, of course, I focused on the women's section of the ICFTU because very early from those sweat shop days, I was determined I was going to help women. I felt all along they got the short end of the pole, even as wives of Foreign Service Officers; that we needed a tremendous amount of work in that area. And there they began ... a Mr. Hans Gottfrucht I remember, was the Director of Education for the ICFTU, and I suggested that we bring in people from the various schools, and I had had this summer school experience so we really patterned one on that basis and got the trade unions. And there we had Murray Weisz who was working, I think, for the Marshall Plan and we were able to get them to help finance to bring in these people from various countries. We had them from quite a few countries, nothing quite like Bryn Mawr, but I had real difficulty with them there because I wanted to do it like we did it at Bryn Mawr. They wanted the dictatorial lecture way, you listen to the lecture. So we had a real conflict in method. So I worked with them and then made an excuse that I had to go home to my

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children. The last week I just couldn't take it. But I did help them draft a statement which I wish I could put my finger on, on what women should look for, and what we should do, which I understand the school liked and used. I tried to get us to begin to formulate the kinds of things that we felt were important. But that was an exciting experience.

Q: It must have been. How long did that last?

PETERSON: It lasted only one session as far as I was concerned. Now maybe it has had more since, I don't know.

Q: I wasn't able to find anything further about it.

PETERSON: I think one would have to find it out from the ICFTU. There were two experiences that come to my mind a lot. I'll never forget the people from Germany who were coming. Some of the students came first, and then the head of the women of the German Trade Union group — not as high as Sigrid certainly, but anyway one that was up came. And when she walked in the dining room, all these German women stood up. I thought, "For heavens sakes, why?" And they said, "We have to." That whole German discipline came back. And the Netherlands people, they came to me and said, "We're going to leave. We will not sit in a room with those people if that's the way they're going to act." Oh, we had to negotiate to stem the tension between the people from the Netherlands and the Germans. I must say, those German women ... I had to just sit in a room with them and really work with them, otherwise I said, "You'll have to go home. You will be the ones that will go." I got hell for that because Mr. Gottfrucht was a German ... "Oh, no, because they're entitled ..." I said, "I'm sorry but ..." That's another story. But it was quite an experience for me. That was a pretty rough time.

Q: That also took place during the time that you were in Brussels.

PETERSON: That's right. And then I did a little pamphlet for them, for the ICFTU. Because I was concerned that all the anti-communist stuff was directed at men, so I did a pamphlet

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that's called "Women, It's Your Fight Too". And by the way, I found a copy of that and I think it's in the Schlesinger Library. My papers are there, and it's called "Women, It's Your Fight Too." It was translated into a number of [languages] ... I was having Oliver look at it, of course.

Q: You, and he, obviously worked very closely together always.

PETERSON: Oh, always. We were always a good team.

Q: Yes. I'm reminded of that because I have the feeling that it was as a team that people thought of you, both in Sweden and of course subsequently in Brussels, but wherever, the two of you working together.

PETERSON: I kind of feel that way. We worked together all the time. They used to laugh and say, "Now you're getting two for the price of one." We used to have a little fun about that because I was not paid for anything.

Q: I'd like to ask you about that because, of course, as you know, this is one of the things that many Foreign Service wives feel is an inappropriate concept.

PETERSON: Well, I think it is. It's hard to tell. You see you have so much responsibility as the wife of a diplomat; the entertaining, and the things that you have to go to, and the things of this kind. I had quite a few examples. I could do an anecdotal history almost of some of the things. I'll never forget one cocktail party when I met Oliver and I was having a little problem with one of the kids, and we were off in the corner and this DCM came in and said, "You two should not be talking to each other." And I said to him, "Mister, I have to see my husband on this thing." I remember fighting back with him because it made me furious. I had things like that happen; those are your "do's" here, you're the wife of ... well, they're not paying me. It was rough.

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Q: Many people have felt that way, and I should think you would have felt so particularly, given your instinctive feelings about the importance of your family, the importance of other things than the kind of protocol requirements.

PETERSON: Exactly, and always with Oliver and me both, families come first. I found interesting things wherever he was, it hasn't been hard for me. Not at all.

Q: You did then leave Brussels and come back to Washington [in 1957] where, I think, you resumed your work with in this case AFL-CIO, and acted as their legislative representative which perhaps is another word for lobby?

PETERSON: As a lobbyist. I called it lobbying. They did an interview and I said, "The lady lobbies for labor." Why not call it what it is? I think I was the first woman lobbyist.

Q: I didn't realize that.

PETERSON: I know I was the first one for labor, whether there were some others or not, I don't know. But I must say that was very necessary for us then because we had Karen at Wellesley, we had Eric getting ready to go. We had to have money. I had to work. We needed the two pay checks. We could not manage because we had been right on the edge before.

Q: You continued that work, I think, right up until your appointment as Assistant Secretary of Labor, and simultaneously of course, head of the Women's Bureau. It was after you assumed those positions that you suggested perhaps to President Kennedy that he consider the idea of a President's Commission on Women?

PETERSON: That's correct.

Q: Was he enthusiastic about that idea?

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PETERSON: I think so. He was a politician. I had worked with him on the consumer questions, and he had said, "If you people support me, I'll see that we move the consumer forward." Which he did certainly as much as possible. He asked me what job I wanted. I had worked on his campaign and I had never thought of doing it for ... and they had offered me United Nations but I would not leave Oliver.

Q: He was already ...

PETERSON: He was under treatment and he had some operations. We weren't sure how long it was going to last. It was a rough period for me, but we needed the pay check very definitely. So that was it.

Q: Which was very fortunate considering your family circumstances because you were, I think at the time, the highest ranking woman in the government.

PETERSON: I was. And at that time I was getting ... you'll laugh at it now, \$18,000. And think what it is now. But then it moved up as I moved up.

Q: You were able to induce Mrs. Roosevelt to be the head of that commission.

PETERSON: The President, as I said, was a politician, and I said, "This is a coming thing." Every year, as a lobbyist we'd had trouble with [the] equal rights amendment and I being a labor person did not want to throw away the advantages that we had in some of the states that protected these low paid working women, and the equal rights amendment could have wiped them out. I said, "My loyalty is for the low-income working woman that has no protections." And I convinced him that we would take that position officially in the government until the women were covered by either the Fair Labor Standards Act so all those left out parts were brought in; the laundry workers, the domestic workers, the food processors, all of those, or they had collective bargaining agreements and that we got the equal pay bill through. And we got all of those and now, "Go ahead and have the amendment if you want it. I'm not going to split and die over it because I'm for specific bills

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for specific ills. I want to get it tied up." But anyway, they were concerned and they would call me and say, "Oh, Esther," (I shouldn't say this, but I will), they'd say, "The tennis shoe ladies are back Esther, what are we going to do?" And we got Senator [Carl] Hayden to always put on a rider, and it evidently seemed to be my job. So I have the reputation at the American Women's Party (i.e., National Woman's Party) that I'm the one who defeated the equal rights amendment. It's not true, but nevertheless, it couldn't have gotten through.

Anyway, I told him [President Kennedy], "You know, the reason people are pressing for that is because we are so uncertain. Where are American women, what are our problems, where are we going, what are the needs? So why don't we do a substantive study and then we'll find out if the equal rights amendment is right and we'll put it forward. But let's know what we're talking about." And he liked the idea. We worked with a number of the people like John Macy, head of the Civil Service Commission, and the others, and got the executive order. I went to him and said, "I want Mrs. Roosevelt. I want the best woman in the United States." "Well, Esther, what's wrong with you? You're the highest ranking ..." I said, "No, I'm not it. It should be Eleanor Roosevelt." But he had had trouble with her because of Stevenson. So he said, "If you can get her to say yes, it's all right." And she did.

Q: And the actual work of the commission, however, was in your hands.

PETERSON: Pretty much.

Q:... and it lasted over a considerable period of time.

PETERSON: We got a beautiful report, the whole thing we did finish it up.

Q: And was in that report included a commitment to state commissions on women? Or did that ...

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PETERSON: No, that developed from it. We had these big meetings all around the United States. We brought people from all around, and I think the state commissions came ... we said there had to be ongoing ... I'm trying to think how that's worded. But we had our foot in the door to move on the state commissions, that's correct. I can't remember quite what the wording is, but the state commissions came as a result of the recommendations.

Q: I find this sequence of events in a round-about way of considerable interest to the Foreign Service, and the Foreign Service wives, because it has only recently occurred to me that from the initiation of that commission which was in 1960-61, to the State Department's policy directive on wives [was] a span of barely a decade. A very short time.

PETERSON: I think we helped with that. I'm trying to remember what specifically happened because I felt strongly about that, as you can well guess. That one, and the one on raising the possibility in the military service, was another one that I remember working on, and taking off the ceiling on secretarial ... I'm trying to think of some of those that were nuts and bolts. I don't remember specifically, but I do think we had something to do with that.

Q: I don't think there's any question that even if it was only a matter of the climate of the time, there was a very ... it's hard to say direct, chain, but certainly one could not have happened without the other.

PETERSON: I could ask Mary Hilton, who was my deputy, what she would remember about it. I'm not sure but I do think there was a linkage one way or another.

Q: Looking back on it, do you see your Foreign Service experience, as a kind of interlude, or a link between what came before and what came after?

PETERSON: Oh, I think a link. There was continuity. I learned so much abroad. In every country I visited I went to the international conferences. I went to the ILO. They called me to ask if I'd go represent the United States, which I did on equal pay. I went there again

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on another one. The League of Women Voters asked me to go and represent them at something. I had a whole new international flavor. It was a continuity. It was not a ... if you want to call that a linkage, yes. It influenced me tremendously really.

Q: I wonder though if you have thought about how fortunate you were in your Foreign Service experience? Because you went, as I said, with the groundwork already laid in your own context. That is to say you didn't go as Oliver Peterson's wife only. But you went with your own background.

PETERSON: But I think when I was first there, I was just Oliver Peterson's wife.

Q: Were you? You felt that way?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. I think gradually the other came forward.

Q: And then it increased as you went along.

PETERSON: You see, I had no idea that I would be as active because I thought my whole time would be with the children. I was very concerned about the children, taking them to this experience. And I assumed that I would be ... and then when I got there and found all these demands on us as wives ... that was quite a shock to me.

Q: In other words, perhaps it was a good thing for you that you were in demand. You did a lot of singing.

PETERSON: Yes, we sang a lot.

Q: Had you always?

PETERSON: Yes. I just sing with people, I don't sing.

Q: No, no, but I mean you obviously ...

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PETERSON: Oh, we always sing. We're a family that sings.

Q: Did you fall into the extraordinary habit, that I find all my Swedish friends have, of being able to compose doggerel, if nothing else?

PETERSON: Yes, we did a lot, and the kids would make place cards for all the dinners, and they'd do it with verses, yes, yes.

Q: I think that's an extraordinary thing that I've never found ... I can't do it. I'm the ug - bug school.

PETERSON: We don't do it now, but that's a Swedish thing.

Q: It certainly is. You were also at some point, I think in between, and how this could have occupied any of your time, I can't imagine, with the American Theater. Do you remember doing anything with that at all?

PETERSON: I was active in the American Women's Club. I was president of that in Brussels, and did a good deal of work with that. I think I helped there tremendously. We tried to get it away from the Lady Bountiful, and do scholarships, and some sensible things.

Q: Some time after your stay there it came about that that American Women's Club became an international organization. Up until that time it had been exclusively American and during the time that I was there it was ...

PETERSON: Were you in Brussels?

Q: Yes.

PETERSON: You never told me about yourself.

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Q: That's another story; we can talk about that. But it was at that time considered a great step forward in the context of the wives' relationships within the community.

PETERSON: What year was that? Because that's fascinating to me.

Q: '61-'62.

PETERSON: I went over and spoke to their big convention in Dusseldorf two years ago.

Q: Yes, that was considerably later.

PETERSON: I was impressed with it. My goodness, the growth of it was really wonderful. Just look around here. That is a batik that my husband had made for me the second Christmas [in Sweden], that's our whole first year. Down the side there, that braid; our daughter had her hair cut. You see Han and Hon [He and She]? I always got it mixed up, but they said that "I said it all with love." My husband had that made. Lapland, we thought was terrible, so they put it way up there. And Upsala, we thought was very far, and the Majs Tang (maypole) where we had ... and the reindeers way up there. We went up to Lapland. At that time we hadn't been there, but I remember when Oliver was talking he said, "Oh, she thinks it's way off." So they put it way at the top because it was a concept. The little house is a stuga we rented in the summer up by Lake Siljan. The Klockan, the Daqens Nyheter, the AT (Evening News), the two papers that he worked with. My favorite song. The flowers and the birch. I just love it. My husband had it made for me.

Q: Where was that made?

PETERSON: In Stockholm, a local artist that we got acquainted with.

Q: How marvelous to have that. And there are undoubtedly many other things not to speak of the photographs.

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PETERSON: Oh, all around the room. The old churn there, that's from Brunswick.

Q: What is that object in the corner?

PETERSON: That's from Africa. That's an African drum. Oliver did a lot of work in Africa too.

Q: Yes. I didn't realize that until recently.

PETERSON: They talked about our going there and he spent a lot of time in Tunis, and north Africa. But there again, it was not right for us and his health was ... they didn't know whether they'd give him a partial or an assignment, or not. Then they put him on the African desk here, so he would go over for stints, as the doctors would let him. So that's there, it's all over the place. It enriched our life very much. I'm very grateful that we had that opportunity, and the children ... when I went back to see Sigrid. I took my oldest son and his oldest son — my grandson — because we wanted to go back and see the old friends again. We had a marvelous time.

Q: How old is your oldest grandson?

PETERSON: Twenty-one, will be very shortly.

Q: He must have particularly appreciated that experience.

PETERSON: He just loved it.

Q: Had he not been [there] at all?

PETERSON: He had not been [there], but my son has been a number of times — the father, Eric. So he took Joshua with him. And I've taken Karen back. I try to go back every other year or so. I've kept up contacts with people, which is great. [When we lived in Sweden] we traveled a lot. We had a station wagon. Oliver fixed the back — we called it a

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Konditorei because he fixed it so we could stop and cook. I think that we contributed a lot to them to see the ease of American living. We tried to do that. And we tried to break the heavy rigid traditions.

Q: Which still are very much in place, I think, despite the many changes that have taken place.

PETERSON: But the new generation is different, I think, don't you? At least the friends that come and see us from time to time. I think one of the things that we did there an awful lot — we danced, and sang. At every party we'd roll up the dining room rug, and we don't do that here. I miss that a lot — now that Christmas is coming. I miss that. I don't know what else to say. Anyway, it was a wonderful experience.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Oliver A. Peterson

Spouse Entered Service:1948Left Service: 1961You Entered Service:1948Left Service: 1957

Status: Widow

Posts: 1948Stockholm. Sweden early 1950sBrussels, Belgium 1957Washington, DC

Spouse's Position: 1948-57Labor Attach# 1957-61Labor Advisor, Bureau of African Affairs

Place and Date of birth: 1906, Provo, Utah

Maiden Name: Eggersten

Parents (Name, Profession):Lars Eggersten, Superintendent of Schools, Provo, Utah

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Annie Nielsen Eggersten

Schools (Prep, University):

BA, 1927, Brigham Young University

MA, 1930, Teachers College, Columbia University

Date and Place of Marriage: New York, 1932

Profession: Consumer Advocate

Children: Karen Peterson Wilken 3/30/38

Eric Niels Peterson 5/25/30

Iver Peterson 6/30/42

Lars Erling Peterson 3/11/46

Esther Peterson has had a distinguished career in the fields of labor, women's issues, and consumer affairs.

She has held high-level posts under three United States Presidents. John F. Kennedy appointed her Director of the Women's Bureau in the Labor Department (1961); Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor Standards (1961-69); and Executive Vice Chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961-63). Eleanor Roosevelt was Chair of this Commission. Under Lyndon B. Johnson, she was, the first Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs (1964-67) and Chair of the President's Committee on Consumer Interests (1964-67). As Special Assistant, she served as consumer spokesperson and advised the President on consumer-related matters. She served in

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this capacity again under President Jimmy Carter, who also called upon her to chair the Consumer Affairs Council, which he created to ensure that consumers had a voice in federal policy-making and programs. From 1970 to 1977, Mrs. Peterson was Vice President of Consumer Programs and consumer adviser to the President of Giant Food Corporation, where she spearheaded numerous innovative consumer-related projects.

Active in the labor movement since the 1930s, Mrs. Peterson was Assistant Director of Education of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (1939-44) and served as the union's legislative representative (1945-48). From 1957 to 1961, she was legislative representative of the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO.

Early in her career, Mrs. Peterson taught at Branch Agricultural College in Utah, Winsor School in Boston, and Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. She received her master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University and has been awarded honorary degrees from many universities. Mrs. Peterson's numerous awards include the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Other awards include the Food Marketing Institute's Industry Statesmanship Award, the Trumpeter Award from the National Consumers League and the Phillip Hart Consumer Award from the Consumer Federation of America. She was elected to the State of Utah's Beehive Hall of Fame.

Mrs. Peterson speaks before organizations throughout the United States and in other countries and serves on the boards of directors of many consumer, educational, and civic associations. She has had her own consumer radio talk show and has appeared on various television news and talk shows speaking directly to consumers on current issues.

Since 1984 she has served as the representative to the United Nations (ECOSOC) in New York for the International Organizations of Consumers Unions (IOCU). She serves as a volunteer traveling extensively for IOCU throughout Asia, South America, Europe and Africa. She has helped to secure passage of the Guidelines for Consumer Protection by the UN General Assembly, and has also helped to win passage in the UN of the

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'Consolidated List of Products Whose Consumption and/or Sale Have Been Banned, Withdrawn, Severely Restricted or Not Approved by Governments.'

Born in 1906 in Provo, Utah, she was married to the late Oliver Peterson and has four children.

End of interview